Shooting the Siege of Antwerp (1914)

American reporters covering the Great War played a prominent part during the siege of Antwerp. While the Germans were shelling the city and civilians fled across the river Scheldt a small group of American journalists stayed in Antwerp which had become a ghost town. Under heavy bombardment they took shelter in the cellar of a private house which was baptized into "Fort Thompson".

By Ron van Dopperen

"Tribune" War Photographer in Midst of Bursting Shells

Edwin F. Weigle, TRIBUNE war photographer, is here photographed t Donald Thompson as he was taking moving pictures of the Germans attackir Antwerp on Oct. 7. He was at a point between Forts Waelhem and St. Cathe ine. In the foreground can be seen the geyserlike effect of German shells hi ling the ground while getting the range of the forts.

Edwin F. Weigle behind his movie camera filming the German shelling of Fort Waelhem near Antwerp, 7 October 1914

For American correspondents in 1914 Belgium was the place to be. Numerous reporters were drawn to this country, eager to get a glimpse of the battlefields. These were the "freelance days" when every word on the war for the news-hungry public was pure gold. The Belgians - too busy with defending their country - had no plans for handling correspondents. As a result, Belgium became an open playing field, even though these journalists frequently lacked proper credentials or a professional background.

For the reporters Belgium was like Dodge City of the Old West. They were frequently arrested and risked being shot as spies, but still these undaunted American correspondents kept showing up. Especially for photographers the opening months of the war provided them with some excellent opportunities. Edwin F. Weigle, cameraman for the *Chicago Tribune*, closed a deal with the Belgian Red Cross. He was given an automobile and driver together with official passes to take war pictures anywhere in Belgium. Freelance cameraman Donald C. Thompson also gravitated towards Antwerp, after eight arrests while covering the battle of Mons. Teaming up with E. Alexander Powell, Thompson noticed he had a

military car and the soldiers jumped at his bidding. “I thought that was the way I ought to travel”, Thompson aptly commented.

Thompson and Weigle were given special privileges. Their American nationality was important here. By giving them access to the Belgian theater of war, their pictures would show the American public the fate of “poor, little Belgium” which had been brutally overrun by the German army. Because of the stories circulating on German atrocities this was a significant propaganda issue. From Antwerp, Thompson and Weigle visited several hotspots where the Belgian army was harassing the German lines. While taking pictures, Powell and Weigle’s editor Joseph Patterson wrote dispatches. At the end of the day, they would return to Hotel St. Antoine in Antwerp to enjoy a comfortable dinner and bed.

Donald Thompson with Graflex plate camera. As a freelancer Thompson also filed his pictures and films for the *Chicago Tribune*

Trapped in Antwerp

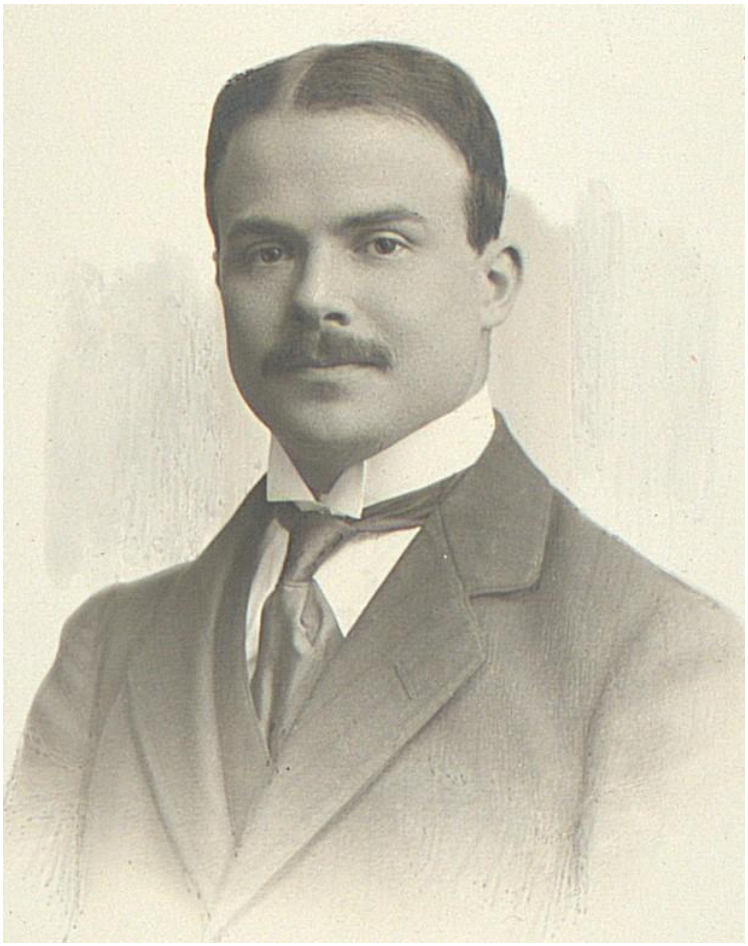
If Belgium resembled the Old West, Antwerp became the Alamo: the place where the American reporters stayed during the final stage of the German drive through Belgium. The “last stand” of these cameramen in Fort Thompson on the southern outskirts of the city is a fascinating episode in World War I history. What follows is a reconstruction of their experiences during the fall of Antwerp.

On 7 October 1914, the Germans began their bombardment of the inner forts and city of Antwerp. The shelling was fearsome. The Germans used their Krupp 42- and 30.5-centimeter heavy guns, the same weapons that had made short work of the Belgian forts at Liège and Namur. Anticipating the bombardment, Belgian civilians were evacuated across the river Scheldt. Shops and banks closed, as well as Hotel St. Antoine where most of the American reporters were staying. The choice was now whether to stay put in Antwerp. All American journalists present wanted to cover the event and decided to stay.

By then, Weigle and Thompson had moved to Rue du Péage 74, which is now called in Flemish Tolstraat. Thompson had found this pleasant three-story house when he met the Belgian owners who were fleeing from Antwerp. Thompson and Weigle were allowed to stay at their place which was promptly renamed Fort Thompson. The owners asked Thompson to put up an American flag taken from the U.S. Consulate as a sign of a neutral zone. According to Weigle, the owners also promised to leave their car behind which they never did. The top floor of the house was rented by Theodoor De Meester, the Dutch vice consul in Antwerp, since August 1914 . Reporter Edward Hunt (*Collier's Weekly*) on the evening of 7 October 1914 also moved to Fort Thompson.

The Shelling of Fort Thompson

Weigle had spent his first days in Antwerp photographing Notre Dame Cathedral and shooting film of the pontoon bridge across the river Scheldt. Judging from a report in the *Chicago Tribune*, he accompanied the Belgian army together with Donald Thompson, taking films of the Germans shelling Fort Waelhem, on 7 October. The bombardment started shortly afterwards that day around midnight. Weigle's account in the *Chicago Tribune* describes what happened inside Fort Thompson upon the impact of the first volley of German shells:



Theodoor H. De Meester, Dutch vice consul in Antwerp. Portrait taken circa 1914-1915, courtesy National Archives in The Hague

> "At midnight Thompson poked his head in my door and said: 'Come on, get up, the music has started'. Half asleep I heard a frightful scream and then an explosion. A minute later De

Meester, the vice consul, came running down in his pajamas. ‘Is there any danger?’, he asked. The next shell struck the house across the street. The explosion shattered every window pane in our house. I took my clothes under one arm and the camera under my other and made for the basement in my bare feet.”

“Shells were coming thicker and faster. They were striking houses all about us. We got into a small place in the cellar used as a coal bin. It was about four feet wide and seven feet long—none too large for four men. There were stone walls on three sides and a marble stairway leading up from the street entrance above our heads. We all felt a bit shaky after we had gone back to our basement hole, but the Dutch vice consul was scared. He couldn’t be quiet. ‘Do you think if it strikes the house, it will knock it to pieces?’, he asked. ‘Do they explode when they strike?’, he went on. Thompson, the Kansas photographer, became nettled. ‘No,’ he replied. ‘Those shells have rubber ends on them. They bounce off if the wall is hard.’ “

Pontoon bridge across the river Scheldt, photographed by Weigle

Hunt also noted De Meester’s anxiety and mentioned “the poor fellow’s state was pitiful”. “Sh-sh-shut the door,” he begged. “Where is the g-g-g-gas meter? We must turn off the g-g-g-gas meter.” By a miracle, the Dutch vice consul’s diary, which was damaged by the shelling, has been preserved and is now in the National Archives in The Hague. His personal notes were cool and collected up until 7 October 1914. As he confessed in

his diary, panic struck that day, and the bombardment scared the hell out of him: “I awoke that night to the sound of whistling grenades. Quickly I descended to the basement, together with the three other people in the house. At first, it seemed like an artillery duel between the Belgian forts and the German guns but soon shells began to fall inside the city. These were fearful and anxious moments. We soon noticed our house was in the direct line of fire.”

Photograph by James H. Hare
Courtesy of Leslie's Weekly
"Beating the Camera"
The author's head just shows in the half-open door.

Fort Thompson on Rue de Péage 74 with U.S. flag above the entrance. Photographed by Jimmy Hare, 8 October 1914

Close call

The first shells crashing into the street were a close call. Just across their house an entire row of buildings was leveled to the ground. Hunt concluded the cellar was a death trap. They had to prepare for the worse possible outcome. He wrote on the walls their names and addresses, so relatives would be notified in case of their death. One o'clock came and the firing increased significantly, which prompted Thompson to say Von Kluck was getting busy. General Von Kluck commanded the massive right wing during the attack on the Western Front, and he was known for concentrating his fire at this time. Each person in the basement reacted according to his own personal feelings. Hunt said he cared little about life since his sweetheart had died recently. "Thompson and I were resigned to our fates", Weigle stated. "We simply felt that, if death was to come, we had to meet it as bravely as we could."

At 4 AM there was a brief lull. Thompson and Hunt went out into the Avenue du Sud where they saw Belgian civilians running for cover in the dark, slipping and crashing over the broken glass. Hunt saw a shell burst in the Avenue du Sud within a few yards of some of them. A woman dropped her baby and ran on without it. The shell had struck just at the corner of the Rue du Péage and Avenue du Sud and had torn a hole three feet deep and seven feet wide. All photographic evidence researched for this article indicates Rue du Péage took a heavy beating during the German bombardment.

Daylight brought a brief slackening of the shelling. The Germans presumably were having breakfast. The Americans could hear the incessant rattle and crash of broken glass on the streets as fugitives stumbled past. The air was now full of powder smoke and they could smell kerosene. Apart from the heavy shells, shrapnel and incendiary bombs were falling. This was when Hunt noted fires began to shoot up nearby. A fifth house in their block was struck that morning.

Around noon, the reporters were visited by Horace Green of the *New York Evening Post*. He had also been asked to stay at Fort Thompson. Dodging shell fire on his way south Green arrived at Fort Thompson to check out his fellow American reporters. They sat for a while listening to the shells. Green tried to persuade the other reporters to come to the Queen's Hotel. It was a safer place because they were now directly in the German firing line but the Germans had not yet got the range of the northern end of the city. Weigle and Thompson however, having to look out for their Kodaks and moving picture stuff, decided to wait a while, as did Hunt.

Enter Jimmy Hare

Shortly after Green's arrival the doorbell rang and this time Fort Thompson was visited by a famous guest. James H. (Jimmy) Hare, pioneer war

photographer who had captured the Spanish-American conflict for *Collier's Weekly*, stood on the doorsteps. Hare had just arrived from England on an assignment for *Leslie's Weekly*. During his stay in the city Hare was arrested as a suspected spy but in the end managed to get out of Antwerp shortly before the fall of the city.

Among Hare's pictures is a photograph of Fort Thompson with Hunt peeping through a window. The scene as recorded by Hare presented a formidable attack – although somewhat staged – on this stronghold of American journalism. Hunt later described the way Hare took this remarkable photograph:

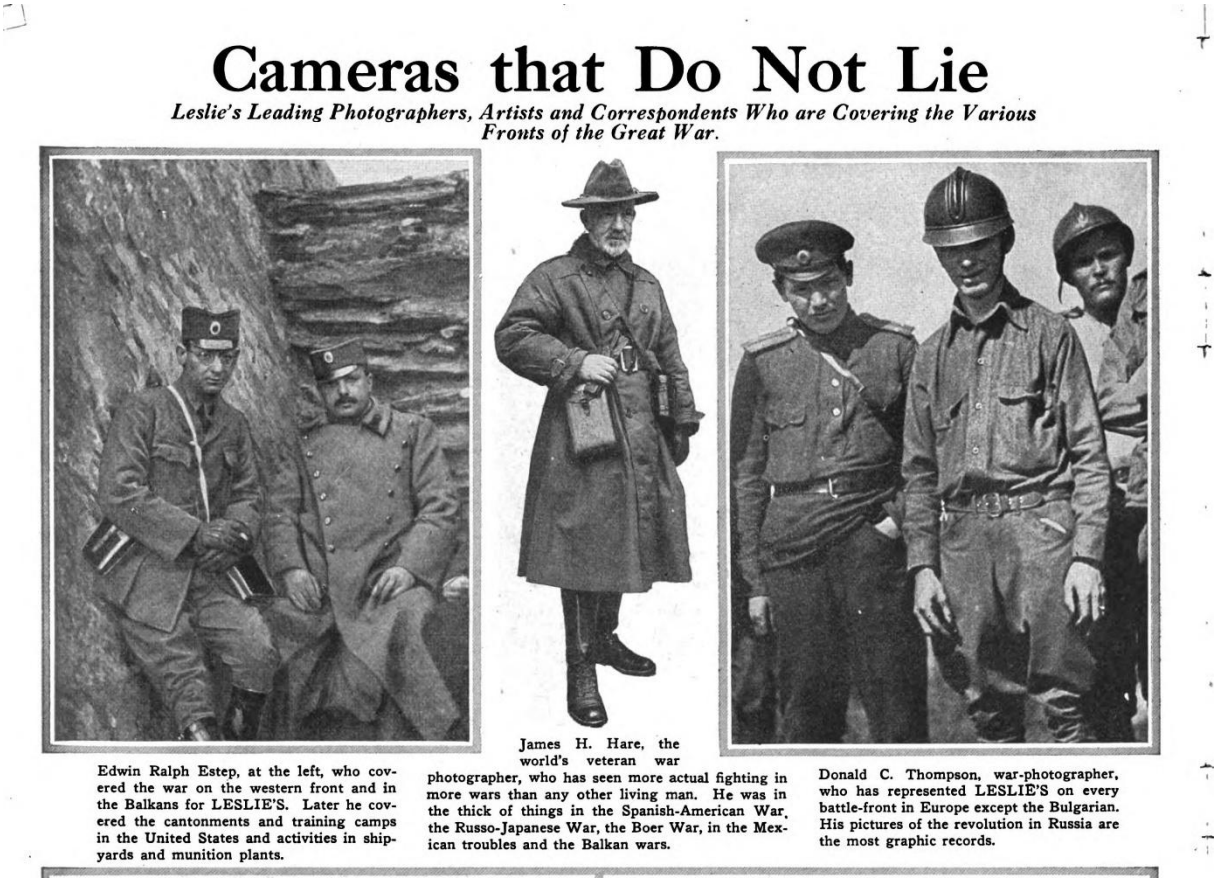
> "A little gray man, about five feet tall, wearing a boy's cap and a brown Norfolk jacket, was hopping about on the other side of the street. He had a small black box in his hand, and he was sighting it at the house. The box was a camera. The little man was Hare. 'Hello! Hello!', he yelled in the tone of an enraptured camera friend. 'Hold that! Fine! Hold that pose! Duck your head behind the door! Great!' He pointed the camera. Heeeeieieieieikkkkkkk-BOOM! … A German shell burst only a quarter of a block away. Hare dodged, but kept the camera pointed. 'Hold that pose!', he yelled again. 'Look scared!' I obeyed without an effort. 'Fine! Great!', he said again. Snap! — the picture was taken, and we ran for the cellar together".

Green and Hare stayed at Fort Thompson for a short while. It was decided they would split for safety reasons and try to get back to the Queen's Hotel. Hare carried two big Kodaks which he wanted to get back to his room in the Queen's. Green offered to carry one of them. The distance back to the hotel was a dash of about three quarters of a mile. Green noted nothing fell close to them. However, *Leslie's Weekly* of 5 November 1914 has a picture by Hare, showing the impact of a German shell, recorded on his way back to his hotel. "The missile whistled past him and crashed into the walls of the house. He writes that he was never before so frightened but out came his camera and he got the picture with the dust and smoke from the explosion still hanging in the air."

Escape from Rue du Péage 74

Around 3.30 PM a shell exploded directly above Rue du Péage 74. According to Hunt, it seemed to bring down half the house. Weigle mentioned the entire building tumbled as a result of the impact. Debris poured into the cellar. The dusk and smoke were suffocating. Together with Thompson Hunt raced upstairs with a bucket of water, ready to put out any fire. The air soon cleared sufficiently to inspect the damage: two floors and part of a third were wrecked. According to De Meester, the shell

had entered through the rear façade on the top floor and crashed into the house next door.



Cameras that Do Not Lie

Leslie's Leading Photographers, Artists and Correspondents Who are Covering the Various Fronts of the Great War.

Edwin Ralph Estep, at the left, who covered the war on the western front and in the Balkans for LESLIE'S. Later he covered the cantonments and training camps in the United States and activities in shipyards and munition plants.

James H. Hare, the world's veteran war photographer, who has seen more actual fighting in more wars than any other living man. He was in the thick of things in the Spanish-American War, the Russo-Japanese War, the Boer War, in the Mexican troubles and the Balkan wars.

Donald C. Thompson, war-photographer, who has represented LESLIE'S on every battle-front in Europe except the Bulgarian. His pictures of the revolution in Russia are the most graphic records.

Article from *Leslie's Weekly* on their leading war photographers, 1918

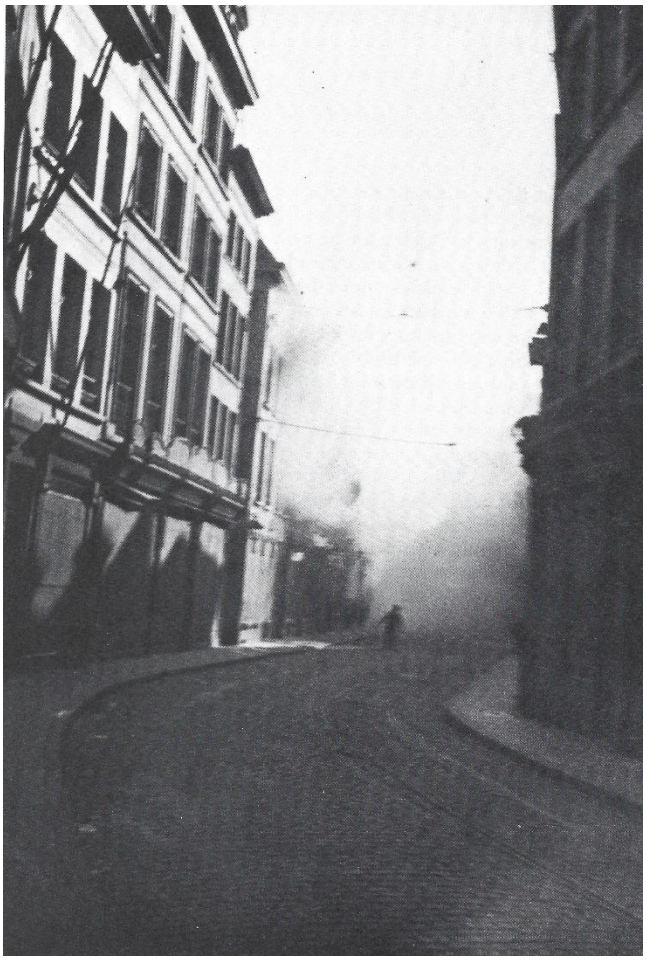
Clearly, Hunt and Thompson decided the time had come to get out. Hunt came back downstairs saying: “Fellows, we've got to do something. We'll be burned up in twenty minutes. If a shell doesn’t get us fire will. “They decided to pull down the mattresses against the front door and go out one by one at a safe distance. They also agreed that if one was wounded, the others were to pick him up and carry him to safety. Upon leaving the house, Weigle pulled his motion picture camera from out of the debris, which had miraculously survived intact.

The time was 4 PM and they had endured a shelling that lasted for fifteen hours. Taking the Boulevard Leopold, they headed north towards the Queen’s Hotel. The streets were empty and to their surprise this part of town was hardly touched by shells. Notre Dame Cathedral also stood untouched. Green described their arrival at the hotel: “Thompson, pale as a sheet, staggered into the deserted lobby, closely followed by Weigle and Hunt and the Dutch vice consul, the latter somewhat out of his head.”

Antwerp in Flames

In the hotel lobby the Americans met James Hare and Arthur Ruhl, reporter for *Collier's Weekly*. Hunt said: "Their nerves were so badly shaken they could scarcely stand. Hare had been arrested by a Belgian officer and narrowly escaped shooting as a spy, Green had had an unusually close shave from a shell, Ruhl had been in the trenches and was worn out." Despite the hardships Weigle and Thompson picked up their cameras and went back to work. Weigle rushed to the top of the hotel to record a bird's eye view of Antwerp. Across the River Scheldt huge oil tanks were in flames along the Hoboken waterfront. Weigle also captured movie scenes of the Belgian and British soldiers fleeing across the pontoon bridge.

The next day – Friday 9 October - around 11 AM the shelling stopped and in the early afternoon German soldiers marched into Antwerp. Here was another opportunity too good to be true. Weigle placed his movie camera on the side of the street and began grinding. The scene returns to Rue du Péage, just across Fort Thompson: "I held out my American flag with my left hand as I turned my picture machine with my right hand. I didn't want to be taken for a soldier with a machine gun. Suddenly an officer got out of his motor. He was very angry. He took my camera, but I protested and told him I was an American citizen and that he was taking American property. I talked German, so I had no trouble in making him understand. I told him he could have the film, and we exposed it all there. Then he gave me back the camera and told me to go."



Impact of a German shell. Picture by Jimmy Hare taken during the bombardment of Antwerp, 8 October 1914

The same day Weigle left Antwerp on a tug and crossed the river Scheldt into neutral Holland. In his luggage was his Pathé film camera as well as the priceless footage that he had shot from the roof of Hotel Queen's. Meanwhile Thompson was also capturing the fall of Antwerp. Having retrieved his photographic equipment Thompson and Hunt went to the

American Consulate. At the Marché aux Lits a fire drew their attention. Thompson unpacked his motion picture box and recorded the scene until the falling walls of the shops compelled him to move on. Thompson at this stage also took pictures of the German soldiers entering Antwerp.

German troops entering Antwerp. Picture taken by Donald Thompson on 9 or 10 October 1914

Fade Out

The final scene also focuses on Rue du Péage. Hunt and Thompson got back to the house on number 74. Hunt has these closing lines for our story:

> "Our house we found still intact, although the third and fourth floors where the shrapnel shell had struck were little more than kindling. The American flag still hung protectingly over the front door. We went inside. A starving cat yowled from the backyard, and we found dry bread and sour milk, and fed it. Beside a rosebush in the yard was a sunken spot, like a grave. Probably our Belgian hosts had buried household treasures there. But our curiosity was dead. We had grown callous and careless from the strain of two days."

After the fall of Antwerp, the American reporters moved on to cover other battles. So far, no films taken by Weigle and Thompson in Antwerp have been found. But we do have some of their photographs. Fort Thompson also still stands firm, as a reminder of this extraordinary event. The basement unfortunately was modernized and there are no names visible any longer that were written on the cellar wall. But the story of Fort Thompson has survived.

About the Author

Ron van Dopperen studied history at the University of Utrecht (Holland) where he wrote his Master of Arts Thesis on the American World War I films. He is co-author with Cooper C. Graham of *Shooting the Great War: Albert Dawson and the American Correspondent Film Company* (2013) and with Jim Castellan and Cooper Graham of *American Cinematographers in the Great War* (2014).

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